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ABSTRACT

In the public school governance structure that evolved between 1900 and 1920, schools were removed from the world of politics, authority was concentrated at the top of the hierarchy, and boards of education were reorganized, resulting in less participation by working-class people. Teachers had little power. Teacher political activities after this were sporadic because the National Education Association (NEA) concentrated power in the hands of school administrators. Following World War II, the McCarthy period had a chilling impact on teacher organizing efforts. Teacher unions became a driving political force in the protest decade of the 1960s. Since that time, teacher negotiation agreements have enlarged the scope of bargaining from initial demands for improved salaries, fringe benefits, and working conditions to involvement in educational decision-making. In addition, teacher unions have engaged in local politics, and have made their influence known at the state and national levels. In light of the teacher cutbacks occurring throughout the country, unions have become more protective of teacher gains. More research is needed on the role being played by teacher unions in American education, focusing primarily on local and state teacher unions. (Author/MLF)

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# Teacher Unions and the Power Structure

Charles W. Cheng

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## CHARLES W. CHENG

The late Charles W. Cheng was assistant professor in the Department of Education at University of California-Los Angeles. He was killed in the tragic DC-10 airplane crash in Chicago in May 1979. Cheng was a leading authority on community participation in collective bargaining in public education.

Prior to his faculty appointment at UCLA, he was a research associate at the Center for Urban Studies, Harvard University, and a research associate for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University Joint Center for Urban Studies.

Before receiving his doctorate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, he worked for seven years as a negotiator and organizer in the teacher union movement. From 1967 to 1972, he was assistant to the president of the Washington Teachers' Union, and before that spent two years as an organizer with the Michigan Federation of Teachers. Prior to his work in the teacher union movement he was a junior high school teacher in Michigan for five years. Cheng was also involved in the efforts to desegregate the schools in Pontiac, Mich., and Boston, and served as a court-appointed monitor in the Los Angeles desegregation case.

He is the author of *Altering Collective Bargaining: Citizen Participation in Educational Decision Making* (Praeger, 1976). His articles have appeared in the *Harvard Educational Review*, *Journal of Education*, *Integrateducation*, *Interchange*, and *Education and Urban Society*.

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Series Editor, Derek L. Burleson

# Teacher Unions and the Power Structure

By Charles W. Cheng

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# Introduction

*The foremost fact about teachers' organizations in the United States is their irrelevance in the national scene. Their futility in protecting the public interest and the legitimate vocational aspirations of teachers is a national tragedy, much more dangerous to our democratic institutions than the excessive power wielded by such familiar bogeys as "Madison Avenue," "Labor Bosses," captains of industry, military high brass, and the like. Because their organizations are weak, teachers are without power, power is exercised upon them to weaken and to corrupt public education.*

—*Myron Lieberman*
The Future of Public Education

It has been more than two decades since Myron Lieberman made the above observation. Two decades ago I began teaching junior high school in Michigan. During the five years I taught between 1959 and 1965, I came to feel the organizational teacher powerlessness that Lieberman so perceptively described. Indeed, in my first year of teaching, I invited the state president of the Michigan Federation of Teachers to meet with 10 teachers at a clandestine meeting in the basement of my parents' home.

When the superintendent heard of the meeting—evidently one of his spies had been at our basement meeting—he said a teacher's union would come into the district over his dead body. Thus, if I had been asked to prepare this paper 20 years ago, I would have spoken of oppressive teacher working conditions, shamefully low teacher wages, teacher exclusion from the decision-making process, administrative

despotism, and virulent anti-unionism; but I would also have noted the then burgeoning teacher union movement.

If someone had told me 20 years ago that the National Education Association (NEA) would remove school administrators from having any political influence within the organization and would become one of the largest independent unions in the nation, I would have said I did not believe in political or educational miracles. The NEA in 1960 did not even believe in bargaining rights for teachers. Yet, before the delegates at the 1977 NEA convention in Minneapolis, John Ryor, then president of NEA declared: "We intend to have a federal collective bargaining law and we intend to have it just as soon as possible. And if Congress wants us off its back on this subject, they had better get with it."[1] This from the leader of an organization that in the early 1960s found collective bargaining abhorrent and whose attacks on teacher unionism were strikingly similar to the anti-labor bias of the National Association of Manufacturers.

Today, anyone familiar with the politics of education knows that the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the NEA, the two largest teacher unions, are indeed highly significant political forces within the national educational community. The change has been swift and at times quite dramatic; although I think it is worth noting that in the 1977 National Society for the Study of Education Yearbook, *The Politics of Education*, there is little mention of teacher organizations and certainly no serious analysis of the impact of teacher organizations on the governance of our schools. Indeed, in preparing this fastback, I was struck by the general absence of any detailed account of the remarkable rise and growing influence of teacher unions within the educational power structure. Joel Spring's recent book *American Education* (Longman's, 1978) is one of the few I ran across that devotes a full chapter to teacher unions within the context of the political forces affecting the governance and control of American education.

Exactly why did teacher unions emerge to challenge the fundamental governance structure of public education? How powerful have teacher unions become in the last decade? Whose primary interest do unions promote? Has collective bargaining served to significantly alter the balance of power in local school systems? Is there any difference be-

tween the political power exercised at the local, state, and national levels by teacher unions? If so, what are the characteristics of these differences? When I first began my teacher organizing as a union representative, I and many of my former colleagues were convinced unions were a force for improving education and for reforming the educational power structure. Are teacher unions a force for change today? Are teacher unions today still outside of the educational power structure?

To respond to these questions requires that I discuss first what I term the old educational power structure. Then I will turn to the emergence of teacher unions as a driving political force in the 1960s, and finally I will focus on collective bargaining in the context of teacher political access and influence. In the concluding section I will argue that, nationally, teacher unions are no longer irrelevant and powerless; rather they have become powerful members of the ruling governance structure in American education. Included in this section will be a brief discussion of teacher organization ideology.

# The Old Educational Power Structure

*By the powerful we mean, of course, those who are able to realize their will, even if others resist it. No one, accordingly, can be truly powerful unless he has access to the command of major institutions, for it is over these institutional means of power that the truly powerful are, in the first instance, powerful.*

—*C. Wright Mills*
The Power Elite

In *Who Controls American Education*, James Koerner concluded that the NEA was part of the educational establishment because it was essentially a conservative organization principally interested in maintaining the status quo. But the NEA, at the time, was controlled by school administrators, superintendents, and some college education professors. He noted, for instance, "... the professional educator for years has disenfranchised the teacher in the teacher's own organization, and the voice of the NEA has therefore been the voice of the establishment."[2] This teacher disenfranchisement and administrative dominance led AFT activists to characterize the NEA as a "company union." The important point to underscore is that until the mid-1960s the NEA did not actively serve to promote the desires and interests of the largest number of its paid membership—classroom teachers. In short, the NEA's own political structure effectively barred the participation of its major constituency.

When Koerner made this observation, he did not include the AFT as being a member of the educational establishment. At this period the AFT, a small organization compared to the NEA, was taking swipes at that elusive body known as the educational establishment; but, on a

national level in the early 1960s, teachers were politically at the very fringe of the educational power structure.

At the local level the situation was not much different. In one of the first important studies done on teacher organizations in five cities, Alan Rosenthal found that educational power still resided with mayors, school boards, and superintendents. The old power structure held sway, and teacher organizations were, by and large, excluded from the decision-making process:

> Although effective in lobbying at Washington, D.C. and state capitols, teachers were politically immobile in local state districts throughout the nation. As community-based interest groups, teacher organizations were practically irrelevant to the decisional processes of local public education.[3]

Ralph Kimbrough in one of his earlier studies argued that businessmen as an occupational group represented the single most important influence at the informal level of the power structure in local school districts. "As a consequence," Kimbrough said, "of their superior status, businessmen exercise the greatest effect upon and often dominate educational policy in the nation."[4] Indeed, he concluded, teachers, boards, or superintendents were rarely a part of the community power structure at the top level.

The old educational power structure can be traced to the form of public school governance structure that evolved between 1900 and 1920. I will not go into any great detail as to how this political structure emerged. Others have dealt adequately with the topic.[5] Nonetheless, it would be appropriate to summarize the historical highlights.

In an effort to combat the evils of ward politics and the patronage system that prevailed in urban centers at the turn of the century, reform-minded progressives sought alternatives to the way cities were then run and governed. Public school governance also received the attention of the progressives. It was an era when law and order, control and punctuality, efficiency and business management techniques were being stressed.

To counter the influence of political machines, which were based in part on immigrant and working-class constituencies, progressive critics pushed for three important school reforms: 1) removal of schools

from the world of politics; 2) professionalization of education, with authority concentrated at the top of the school hierarchy; and 3) reorganization of boards of education. Concentration of power at the top and board reorganization provided a structure that enormously influenced the control of public schools. Professionalization gave rise to school bureaucracies, and the power to make critical policy decisions was fundamentally vested in the superintendency. Educational policy would be decided at the top and then imposed and/or handed down to classroom teachers, who were at the bottom of the pyramid. The vast gap between the salaries of school administrators and those of teachers even today can be attributed to the manner in which political authority was allocated under this model.

The outcome of board reorganization tended to remove working-class people from participating as members of boards of education. Boards became dominated by professionals, business leaders, elite citizens, and in general represented middle- to upper-class values. School board membership and structure had implications for the political status of teachers within the educational power structure. Board members, for the most part, shared the value system which stressed a "top-down" form of governance structure. Thus teachers as a collective entity were not considered decision makers within this political arrangement. Quite the contrary, teachers were expected to be beholden to the professional educational leader of the school system, the superintendent. Laurence Iannaccone, in describing the outcome of the progressive reform era, which he labels the "first revolution" in the politics of education, states:

> The reform doctrine is a thoroughgoing apologia for power of the strong administrative state, especially in its belief in the neutral competence of the professional. Given the doctrine of neutral competency and the increased training of educators, it was inevitable that school administrators would acquire greater control over the policy system.[6]

What the early progressives created was a hierarchical model placing the locus of authority in the superintendency, and the superintendency eventually emerged as one of the controlling institutions in local school districts. This mode of governance did not allow for the *collective participation* of teachers in the governance of schools. In citing the

importance of the superintendency, I am not overlooking the growth and political influence of the larger school bureaucracy. This middle layer of school management has often served as one of the major impediments to school reform.[7] Equally important, the social class make-up of school boards and the ideology of board members reinforced the pyramid model of school governance, which assigned teachers to a subservient role in school policy formation.

Teachers, then, paraphrasing C. Wright Mills, had little command over the major institution for which they worked; therefore they were unable to realize their will.

## The Beginnings of the Challenge

Obviously, the educational political power structure just described was intact long before the 1960s, when teachers were beginning to be a significant political force. However, it would be misleading to suggest that teacher groups were completely inactive before that time. Teacher tenure laws, academic freedom cases, and lobbying efforts to improve salary and retirement benefits were pushed by state teacher organizations. During the depression, for example, the Chicago Teachers Union led a militant demonstration against the banks. From 1942 to 1959 there were over 100 teacher strikes in the country.[8] While the NEA certainly was under the dominant influence of conservative educators, the organization served as an important national force in shaping curriculum proposals, developing the modern high school, and influencing the standardization of teacher training in the country.[9] The teaching profession gained some benefits from these actions, but as far as being considered a serious challenge to the educational establishment, collective teacher political activities remained rather sporadic.

Why did the teacher revolt occur in the 1960s and not earlier? While the evidence is not conclusive, I will offer several suggestions as to why teacher influence was kept in check. Within the NEA itself, a reorganization occurred in 1921 at the national level that concentrated power in the hands of school administrators and the NEA staff.[10] This lasted until the 1960s when the NEA came under control of classroom teachers with a contemporary urban orientation.

One might have expected some spin-off in the teaching profession as a result of the massive organizing drives conducted by the Congress

of Industrial Organizations (CIO) during the late 1930s and early 1940s. In fact, there were many teachers within the ranks of the AFT who strongly identified with the activities of the CIO. But the AFT was having its own internal struggles between factions siding with the CIO and those who supported the more conservative approach of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), with which the AFT was affiliated. However, the central clash centered around communist influence within the AFT. Between 1935 and 1942 this issue wracked the organization, eventually resulting in the expulsion of three AFT locals, including the big influential Teachers Union of the City of New York, which later joined the CIO. When the three locals were expelled, the AFT lost some of its most skilled organizers, theoreticians, intellectuals, and liberal thinkers—all at a critical stage in American labor history. The AFT really mounted no nationally successful organizing effort until the 1960s.

Following World War II, Cold War policies as related to internal security had a chilling impact on teacher organizing efforts. During the McCarthy period, fear of being labelled a communist or a communist dupe discouraged many social and political activitists, including teachers, from engaging in open conflict with the political power structure. For many, dissent that challenged the power structure was viewed as a communist conspiracy to undermine the American way of life. Also, there was a teacher loyalty to the prevailing relationships between teacher organizations and school administrators, particularly among a significant number of NEA members. In fact, when I was organizing in the early 1960s, there was a strong anti-union sentiment among many teachers.

Thus, as the 1960s approached, those analyzing the educational power structure judged teacher unions impotent. But this was not to last for long. Teachers, like many other workers, were becoming restless and disenchanted with the impenetrable school bureaucracies. In *What's Happened to Teacher?* Myron Brenton captured a prevailing teacher sentiment regarding the growth of the school bureaucracy and impersonalization of the schools:

> . . . teachers have become mass production workers on an educational assembly line, removed from the source of powers and alienated from the

institution that employs them, somewhat the way a factory worker is alienated from the plant that pays his wages but with which he feels little sense of identification."

It is worth noting the time parallel between the teacher revolt and the burgeoning civil rights movement of the 1960s. Indeed, America as a nation appeared to be in revolt—students on the campus and in the classroom, women in their homes and in the work force, and blacks in the cotton fields of the South and ghettos of the North. We had moved from the silent generation of the 1950s to the protest decade of the 1960s.

**Revolt Begins**

Not surprisingly, the teacher revolt began in the urban centers with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), an affiliate of the AFT in New York City, leading the battle. The New York City teacher collective bargaining election in 1961 was one of the landmark educational events in the last 20 years. From there the AFT launched a national campaign to secure bargaining rights. Bargaining was to become the political tool for breaking up the existing educational power structure. Within a few short years, teachers had won bargaining rights in Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, Baltimore, Newark, Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Washington, D.C., and countless numbers of smaller cities. Most of the city campaigns were waged and won by AFT affiliates; and, importantly, the Industrial Union Department (IUD) of the AFL-CIO, then headed by Walter Reuther, provided some of the necessary funds to support some of these bargaining elections. For example, the AFT affiliate spent approximately $250,000 in the collective bargaining election held in Washington, D.C., in 1967.

This AFT organizing activity had an impact on NEA. Bargaining campaigns intensified the rivalry between NEA and AFT as each sought to capture the votes of classroom teachers. Outside pressure, stemming from the AFT's national bargaining campaign and internal pressure from urban-oriented members of NEA's Department of Classroom Teachers, led to drastic policy shifts by the NEA. These shifts were so extensive that by the beginning of the 1970s the NEA no longer opposed bargaining or teacher strikes. Further, organizational changes resulted in classroom teachers assuming dominant authority on the

NEA board of directors. Today, the NEA is led by a young executive secretary who participated in the bargaining movement in Michigan, one of the first states to have a comprehensive bargaining statute covering teachers. As a result of NEA and AFT efforts, bargaining has become widespread. By 1981, bargaining was mandated in 31 states.

Indeed, the differences between the NEA and AFT became so blurred that national merger discussions were initiated. Although mergers were consummated at the state level in New York (which was later dissolved) and at the local level in Los Angeles, Flint (Michigan), and New Orleans, today a national merger still appears to be several years away. While this fastback does not consider the merger issue and the problems surrounding the establishment of a single national teachers union, it is important to bear in mind the potential political implications such a uniting of the AFT and NEA might have on the future of American politics.

Nationally, the AFT and NEA are no longer powerless organizations. For example, the delegates at the national 1981 NEA convention approved an operating budget of $74.5 million, for a membership of 1.7 million. The AFT, while much smaller, had grown to 580 thousand members by 1981, and its president, Albert Shanker, holds an important vice president position on the national AFL-CIO executive council. Such statistics confirm that these teacher organizations are hardly irrelevant to the national scene. But what do they mean in regard to a redistribution of power within the educational power structure? Some answers can be found by examining this new thrust of teacher unions at the national, state, and local levels.

## Emergence of Collective Bargaining

When one thinks of the emergence of teacher organizations as a potent political force, images come to mind of striking teachers walking a picket line, or a newspaper headline proclaiming that a teachers' strike was avoided through all-night negotiations. Such images correctly associate contemporary teacher unions with collective bargaining, and bargaining is the mechanism teacher unions have employed to alter the balance of power at the local level. In their study on the impact of bargaining in public education, Charles Perry and Wesley Wildman found:

> Bargaining in education has had a definite impact on working conditions, traditionally conceived; the teacher personnel codes and manuals of school systems are being modified and rewritten jointly in negotiations by teacher organizations and school administrators.
>
> In "policy" and "professional" areas, too, bargaining has gained for teachers a voice, if not control, in matters hitherto reserved exclusively to board and administrators.[1]

As a result of this power achieved at the bargaining table, the collective voice of the teachers has become a critical factor in educational policy making. Indisputably, collective bargaining alters the decision-making process in local school districts, especially in the allocation of finances and in improving working conditions. A good contract reduces the possibility of unilateral decision making by the administration and the school board and gives the teacher union a partnership role in educational policy making.

It is beyond the scope of this fastback to explore in detail the total impact teacher bargaining is having in school districts across the

country. Nevertheless, I believe there is sufficient evidence to offer some tentative remarks regarding the general impact that teacher negotiations have had on the educational power structure during the last decade.

The overriding issue at the local level is what areas can teacher unions negotiate at the bargaining table. In labor parlance this is referred to as the scope of bargaining. Prior to winning bargaining rights, teachers had no say in the design and location of school buildings, financing education, equalization of educational opportunity, size and scheduling of classes, purchase of equipment, training of teachers, staff development, grouping of students, or curriculum development. With the advent of bargaining, however, teachers now have a voice in some of these areas as well as in many other areas.

Initially, teacher unions bargained for improved salaries, fringe benefits, and working conditions. The president of the Chicago Teachers Unions, AFT Local 1, voiced the prevalent views held by union leaders and by most of the rank and file:

> Salaries are the first thing. I want to get the highest salaries in the country. Then we can work on class size.[3]

As a former union organizer, I can testify that improved salaries were indeed the primary concern in the early days of collective bargaining. Still, teacher unions did press beyond salary and working conditions in their negotiations. Many scholars of labor relations have noted the distinctly different emphasis of teacher union demands compared to private sector unions:

> There is a marked broadening in the scope of negotiations for public school teachers when compared with virtually any other classification of employee, public or private. It is widely recognized that the status of teachers as professionals gives them a legitimate concern as to educational objectives and professional standards.[4]

The former president of the AFT, David Selden, often characterized the AFT first as a union concerned with traditional economic demands; second, as an educational organization concerned with educational issues; and third, as a social reform organization.



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But the scope of negotiable areas remains uneven across the country. Some states have statutes permitting a broad interpretation of scope; while in others the scope is much more restrictive, especially with respect to negotiating educational policy.[15] Court decisions and labor relations board decisions, however, reveal an ever widening scope of bargaining areas. Even where the scope appears to be limited, unions have been successful in expanding the areas of negotiations. But as H. C. Hudgins points out, there are some restrictions:

> Where school boards have negotiated, courts have ruled that a resolution of the items cannot be in conflict with existing laws or with managerial prerogatives, that is, with the policy making function of the board. . . .

But he then adds:

> The legal definition of policy is not patently clear . . . In spite of this, teacher organizations have clearly become greater partners or adversaries in decision making. Fewer unilateral decisions are being made by school boards. It seems likely there may be even a fewer such decisions in the years ahead.[16]

Expansion of the scope of negotiable areas is, of course, resisted by school boards and administrators, for it is viewed as an encroachment on their authority to make policy. However, few would deny that collective bargaining has altered in some fashion the educational decision-making process in school districts. Of course, not all local teacher unions are as powerful as the UFT in New York City, which was able to kill an experimental program in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district in Brooklyn; and not all unions are able to negotiate such comprehensive contracts as the UFT. However, we must not make the mistake of equating the UFT with teacher unions nationally. To be sure, the UFT has been a pacesetter and often a barometer. Nonetheless, when we look beyond teacher unionism in New York City, we find some unions that have welcomed community school experiments. Also, we must recognize that few unions have achieved contracts that match the rhetoric of their bargaining demands. With the current economic crunch, teacher unions, even including the UFT, have not been successful in preventing massive loss of teacher jobs at the local level. The state of Ohio is a perfect example of a state where unions have been unable to prevent

loss of jobs or the closing of schools, which resulted in teachers losing their salaries for a period of time.

Teacher unions have also been hard hit by inflation, by the financial plight of our cities, and by declining enrollments. As the country entered a period of high unemployment and declining real incomes, it became more difficult for teachers to win big salary increases, in spite of collective bargaining. My own review of teacher contracts suggests teachers have altered the balance of power by securing a degree of access to the policy-making process.[7] Nonetheless, I would hesitate to conclude that unions, as some have claimed, have generally achieved anything near dominant control.

The contractual agreement in Omaha, for instance, will be quite different from the one in Detroit. Contracts in areas which have had bargaining rights for longer periods of time will contrast sharply with those in a state like California where bargaining has been permitted only in recent years. Contracts in southern states tend to differ markedly from those in the eastern states, a reflection of the South's past resistance to unionism. In short, there is no monolithic NEA or AFT national influence that somehow insures the controlling authority of teacher unions at the bargaining table. Until systematic research is done, I think our knowledge and understandings of teacher union influence within the context of the local educational power structure will remain largely impressionistic. We need in-depth studies that analyze all the dimensions of school board-teacher union relationships.

Although teacher unions' major emphasis is on bargaining in local school districts, they have not neglected other political activities. They engage in local politics, particularly school board elections; and as school financing becomes more a state function, unions are likely to become increasingly active in state legislative campaigns.

Local political action by teacher unions is in many ways a holding action, often intended to prevent election of openly anti-union candidates. There is little evidence to suggest that the election of union-backed school board members leads to lasting union influence among boards of education. Certainly, union-backed candidates may have some sympathies or even allegiance to the union, but there is no guarantee this will be the case. We need more research on the effects of

teacher political action before any concrete conclusions can be drawn. Obviously, unions hope their efforts will provide a more sympathetic board.

While electoral politics is not the mainstay of union power at the school district level, unions may derive important benefits from supporting political candidates for the state legislature.

At the state level both NEA and AFT affiliates have lobbied intensely for the passage of strong collective bargaining statutes, increased state financial support to school districts, teacher retirement plans, and other educational measures that are likely to have an impact on teachers. Of course, teacher unions don't limit themselves to only these kinds of traditional lobbying activities. In 1973 the New Jersey Education Association demonstrated its political muscle by successfully preventing the reappointment of Carl Marburger for a second term as New Jersey Commissioner of Education. Another indication of teacher union political action is that the AFT and the NEA spent more money in the 1974 California election than any other single interest group and were second only to the oil industry in total spending.

It should be pointed out that until the advent of bargaining, the NEA had strong state affiliates but weaker local affiliates. State NEA affiliates remain strong today, but their political strength varies from state to state. Indeed, some state NEA affiliates separate themselves from official national NEA stances. Even though the NEA supports the right to strike and the passage of a national collective bargaining law, some southern and rural state affiliates oppose these positions. State AFT affiliates on the other hand have not been as strong as their NEA counterparts because local autonomy is emphasized in the AFT. AFT affiliates, as a result of their affiliation with the AFL-CIO, often relied on the lobbying support of labor groups at the state capital.

The advent of bargaining contributed to the growth of state AFT organizations. Local affiliates of both the AFT and the NEA turned to their state organizations for resources and experienced staff who could offer guidance in the actual conduct of negotiations. Further, pressure for passage or revision of bargaining statutes led AFT locals to give stronger support to their state organization. Local AFT units, while maintaining a working relationship with the AFL-CIO, began to see

the need for a stronger independent lobbying resource in the state capital.

As state governments take on greater financial control of public education, there is the possibility that statewide bargaining could emerge since bargaining is likely to follow the source of revenue. Unions to date have not expressed any strong desire for statewide bargaining, particularly in states where there are bargaining agent affiliates of both the NEA and AFT. Yet unions in some areas have experimented with the concept of regional bargaining; some have agreed not to settle until all unions within a given jurisdiction have signed agreements. We also have seen statewide teacher strikes in Florida and Delaware. This could be a prelude to statewide bargaining.

Certainly statewide bargaining, should it materialize, might significantly alter the base of the local educational power structure. If this did happen, state teacher organizations, state legislatures, and state departments of education would likely become much more powerful.

At the national level teacher unions are moving beyond traditional educational politics. In 1976 and again in 1980, the NEA endorsed Jimmy Carter for the U.S. Presidency. The AFT already had done so when it backed Senator George McGovern for President in 1972. Congressional candidates have also received financial and other support from both the NEA and AFT.

The two national unions devote considerable time and funds to lobbying efforts, much as any other special-interest group does in Washington. Lobbying by the AFT and NEA was largely responsible for the establishment of teacher centers. Both organizations have lobbied intensely against the tuition tax credit bill. While their political action is on the rise, neither organization has been able to overcome the power structure that opposes a national collective bargaining bill; that opposes general aid to states and local districts rather than categorical grants, or that opposes more financial support to deteriorating school systems.

To some extent organizational differences between the AFT and NEA preclude a united front on some of these issues. For example, the AFT opposed the creation of a cabinet-level department of education, while the NEA is a strong advocate of such a measure. They were

on opposite sides of the *Bakke* reverse discrimination case, with the AFT supporting Bakke and the NEA backing the University of California. They have even been divided over a national bargaining bill: the AFT wants teachers included under the National Labor Relations Act; the NEA would prefer a separate statute governing public employees.

Historically, the AFT has been considered more left of center than the NEA on social and political issues. In part this has been attributed to AFT's affiliation with organized labor, which some contend has influenced the AFT in adopting a broader social outlook. Joel Spring suggests, for example, that the AFT has a wider social vision than the NEA. He indicates that AFT's "Educare program and other goals represent concerns that go beyond salaries and working conditions to include shaping the basic structure of American education."[18] Yet he goes on to say that "while all major goals of the AFT are linked to either general school policy issues or the national economy, they are all designed to protect and improve teachers' salaries and welfare and to increase teacher control of education."[19] Such goals are not dissimilar to the NEA. I would disagree somewhat with Spring's assessment of the two organizations. I don't think the political differences between the NEA and AFT are as sharply divergent as he implies. For instance, the NEA at its 1977 convention reaffirmed its support for the Equal Rights Amendment, full integration of schools, fair housing, one man-one vote principle, higher quality in television programming with less emphasis on violence, aid to migrant workers, as well as passing a resolution calling upon teachers to support the boycott of J. P. Stevens products. Such goals represent a broadening of NEA social goals and a marked departure from past practices.

To be sure, as Spring points out, NEA's greater diversity in membership prevents the organization from achieving a consensus about political and social issues. Nonetheless, the fact that AFT is associated with the AFL-CIO does not necessarily mean its goals are that much more liberal than the NEA. While there are strong emotional differences over the *Bakke* case, for instance, the fact is the AFT took a stance in this case that was widely opposed by a number of liberal groups in the country. Equal opportunity and job equity remain major social

issues to be resolved by this society, and the AFT's position is viewed by many as representing a maintenance of class privilege at the expense of minority groups.

Still, whatever their differences, one thing is clear: The NEA and AFT at the national level are included in that portion of the educational power structure which lobbies vigorously on behalf of education. NEA and AFT are primarily concerned with teacher welfare issues, although both certainly are involved in promoting issues and causes that transcend immediate teacher interests.

## Teacher Unionism Ideology

Is there a general teacher union ideology? I think there is. Teacher unions, now having achieved a modicum of influence, have not revealed any great interest in questioning the ideological and political foundations of the educational power structure.

Mario Fantini has stated the case this way:

> Teachers' unions are now placed in a situation in which they must defend the system as adequate, needing only extra money to improve. Since they wield much of the power within the public schools, they find it increasingly easy to dismiss any reform proposal that fundamentally alters the status quo.[25]

Teacher unionism ideology, then, can be said to be based on reformism and protectionism. For example, teacher unions have accepted the student deficit theory—the general premise underlying federal compensatory education programs for the poor and minority students. Organizationally, the NEA and AFT hold viewpoints in this area similar to the American Association of School Administrators, the American School Board Association, the Department of Education, and a number of educational researchers. Such a point of view finds little fault with the educational structure or the educational programs being provided disadvantaged students. On the contrary, the fault is seen to rest primarily with the youngster and the family, without taking into account the economic, educational, and social inequities of our society. Yet these competing interest groups within the educational power structure will join together in lobbying for increased funding for different forms of compensatory education and call it reform.

In this sense, teacher unionism as a reform movement is strikingly similar to other educational reform movements of the past. In speaking

of some of these educational developments and innovations such as the kindergarten, junior high, testing, new math, etc., Michael Katz has observed:

> Each has brought about change; but—and this is the important point—it is within a given structure that itself has not been altered.[21]

Katz describes the fundamental structural characteristics of public education as being "universal, tax supported, free, compulsory, bureaucratically arranged, class-biased, and racist."[22] Teacher unionism does not question the hierarchical governing arrangements of school systems. Also, such critical issues as teacher evaluation and assessment of teacher competencies are treated as *due process* issues by teacher organizations. Efforts to reassess or alter, in a substantive way, how we arrive at a congruence of teacher evaluation and due process rights is generally given mere lip service.

Reform as practiced by teacher groups takes on the character of what Frank W. Lutz describes as "expertise politics."[23] Expertise politics is when another group of experts—in this case the collective teacher—is allowed to participate in the educational policy arena. Using Lutz's definition, teacher unionism can be viewed as an attempt by teachers to join administrative experts in formulating and executing policy.

Importantly, this aspect of reform was built on the union's demand for democratizing the schools. Expanding democracy was seen as a way to provide teachers more say in running the schools and thus eliminate the traditional "top down" system of school governance. Indeed, the AFT's slogan still remains "democracy in education, education for democracy." Yet this expansion of democratic rights for teachers has come to be dominated by an emphasis on internal professional control. Such control stems from an ideology of protectionism, which is more evident today in light of the teacher cutbacks occurring throughout the country. Protectionism generally leads unions to adopt a defensive posture regarding almost any change that might appear to threaten the political power of teacher organizations or lead to reductions in staff. Educational experimentation is now considered by some to be a euphemism for anti-union attacks.

In part, expertise politics also can be considered a consequence of protectionist ideology. Professional union leaders, like many other public school educators, tend to share the same distrust of lay interference in the running of schools. Under such a protectionist ideology, teacher unions, having gained access to the policy-making process, accept the idea of professional control over the running of schools. Citizen groups, parents, and organized minorities are not satisfied with this approach to educational policy making because it is still a closed political system under the controlling influence of the old and new professionals—with the new professionals emerging out of the bargaining process itself.

Elsewhere I have identified three groups in this new professional class: teacher union staff leaders, third-party neutrals, and board negotiators, including a new breed of public sector labor lawyers.[24] Much more investigation is required in order to determine the influence of this new professional class in collective bargaining. We do know one thing: There is an influential role being played by labor relations lawyers on both sides of the bargaining table. There is also concern about the role of third-party neutrals in teacher bargaining disputes. Do mediators and arbitrators actually shape educational policy when they assist in resolving contract disputes? We need to explore this issue because third-party neutrals are distantly removed from the issues in the classroom and from the community. This is not to say there is something inherently wrong with this approach. However, the larger question is: To whom is this new professional class accountable?

The important point to be made here is that our public schools are supposed to serve the public interest. We know from past and current research that poor and minority group interests are frequently not met by our public schools. The question is whether this new professional class is serving the public interest or whether it is primarily serving the self-interest of unions, school management, and third-party neutrals. For example, such issues as discipline, curriculum offerings, and teacher performance are of equal concern to parents and to teacher unions. Yet the bargaining structure excludes parents from having a say on these issues when they come up in a collective bargaining agreement.

In some parts of the country citizens, like teacher groups, have attempted to gain access to the educational policy-making process. Generally, citizens want a more decentralized decision-making process in order to effectuate educational programs at the school site level. A recently enacted California law, for instance, mandates school site councils, consisting of an equal number of parents and school staff. School site councils under the law have authority to make decisions regarding expenditure of state funds, planning and developing new programs, and program evaluation at the individual school sites. Such a process is highly decentralized; and the unions are generally opposed to the concept for fear it might undermine the power gained through the collective bargaining agreement, which is negotiated at the district level. The California Teachers Association pointed out to its members that, where a conflict might surface between a decision by the school site councils and the bargaining agreement, the agreement was supreme over any decisions made by these councils.[25] A few years ago the president of the San Francisco Teachers Union protested the concept of school site budgeting.[26] Obviously, such a process might greatly diminish the authority and power of the union, which is derived from a more centralized decision-making process. It is noteworthy that the position of the California NEA and AFT affiliates are basically indistinguishable on this important governance issue.

Once bargaining is well established and unions have gained a consolidated power base, bargaining as an institution becomes accommodating, and unions as a political force become conservative. Noting the tendency of bargaining to accept the status quo, Robert Doherty has stated:

> I think another reason for believing the present system will remain undisturbed for some time can be found in the bargaining process itself. Bargaining is less a generator of new ideas than it is a mechanism for compromise.[27]

Even Albert Shanker, president of AFT, has said, "There's a process of institutionalizing the AFT that's going on. The AFT has been a movement and as a movement, all movements are more radical than the institutions which they later become."[28] Myron Brenton also pointed

out the conservative character of teacher unions: ". . . as salaries and working conditions have improved, its members have become more protectionist-minded." He particularly noted this development within the New York City UFT, considered by most observers to be the strongest local teacher organization in the country:

> The UFT is the foremost example of a formerly progressive teachers' union grown increasingly powerful, political, and protectionist.[29]

While these latter observations pertain to the AFT, I believe the generalizations can be equally applied to NEA affiliates across the country.

Nonetheless, teacher unions have made positive advances for teachers. Unions have broadened the decision-making process, thereby contributing to an expanded democracy within the profession. Teacher participation in many policy-making areas has increased as a result of collective bargaining. Teachers in some districts now contractually serve on curriculum policy committees, participate as leaders in staff development programs, and develop teacher evaluation procedures. These advances are not to be dismissed.

While one can decry the economic emphasis of teacher unionism, the facts are that the real wages of teachers in terms of purchasing power have declined over the last several years. Teachers, like other workers, are being hard hit by inflation and the economic crunch. Furthermore, in the last few years job security has become a legitimate concern of teacher unions. Massive layoffs and elimination of teaching positions are major issues at the negotiating table. Proposition 13 in California has aroused the fear of teacher organizations in that state; and should other states adopt similar measures, teachers across the country are likely to push their organizations to become even more protectionist minded.

In sum, to a certain extent, the economic issues confronting all of society are mirrored within the education profession. Teacher unions and their leadership, like most unions that have reached accommodation with the orientation of capitalist management relations, are guided by a dominant ideology that fundamentally accepts incremental reform as a way of resolving problems.

# Conclusion

*The increased political militancy of the NEA and the growth of the AFT might result in greater power for professional educators over school financing and educational policy. But this will not occur without increased and continued conflict with local and national power structures.*

—*Joel Spring*
American Education

A collective teachers' consciousness has asserted itself in the politics of American education. Teacher unions are basically politically secure, and their legitimacy has been established. Teacher unions are in business to serve the interests of their paid membership, and in many respects the evidence suggests most teachers are reasonably satisfied with the results. Teacher unions have altered the school policy decision-making process; it may well be that overall school governance is also being significantly changed as a result of bargaining.

We are now aware of the national presence of teacher unions, but there has been little rigorous examination of the role being played by teacher unions in American education. As previously indicated, I would encourage more research based on a comparative and case study approach. This research should focus primarily on local and state teacher unions. Such studies should include, but not necessarily be limited to, the local educational power structure and its political relationship to the union, the union's political involvement in electoral politics and lobbying, the influence of teacher unionism on educational policy making, the ideology and values of the union as an or-

ganization, and the educational issues pushed by the union. Much more empirical evidence is needed before we shall have a clearer understanding of the role they now play in the educational power structure. In short, teacher unionism is a fertile area for serious scholars interested in the politics in education.

With the advent of bargaining, there is no question but that teacher unions today are an influential political force within the educational power structure. This is not to say, however, that teacher unions are free from political struggles. Inadequate teacher salaries; conflict over the scope of bargainable issues; scarcity of financial resources; union resistance from school boards, administrators, and taxpayer associations; declining job openings for new teachers; and massive layoffs—all present obstacles to unions gaining stronger access to and influence in the educational power structure. Underscoring the trying times for unions today, Arnold Newman, Director of Conciliation for New York State Public Employment Relations Board has noted:

> We all recognize that, particularly at this time—when there is antipathy toward government in general and toward public employees and public employee unions and when governments are seeking to cut back on budgets and on staffs—the power relationship is not tilted in favor of the unions.[36]

Still, teacher unions are no longer powerless. Their rhetoric to the contrary, teacher unions are not on the outside of the educational power structure looking in. In many communities unions have achieved power equal to the administration in many areas of decision making.

However, I have also underscored—and this is the important point—unions have not become *the controlling political force* in school politics. At the local and state level, teacher power is uneven across the country. Also, given the decentralized character of the NEA and AFT, some local and state affiliates are simply much stronger than others.

In my opinion, there is a tendency to attribute too much to collective bargaining and teacher power. Many school board members and school administrators contend unions and bargaining are the prime

reasons for an erosion of their authority. I believe this is patently false. Federal laws such as Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) and important Supreme Court decisions, notably those dealing with desegregation, bilingualism, and equalization of school finances have all contributed to the shifting of the balance of power within the educational power structure. In fact, these very issues frequently serve as a significant constraint on what can be bargained.

Teacher unions have also made accommodations with the educational power structure because they share the same fundamental ideology as that of professional educators who previously monopolized the educational policy-making process. Essentially, teacher unions are concentrating their efforts within the boundaries of the educational power structure that evolved during the first 30 years of this century.

Finally, as one who participated actively as a teacher and teacher union organizer during the early growth of the teacher union movement, I am still strongly supportive of the right of teachers to organize and to influence what happens at the workplace. While I question whether teacher unions are truly progressive, it does seem that within the educational power structure, they tend to be more liberal on educational and social issues than most foundations, school administrator organizations, schools of education, school boards, and federal education agencies.

While on the one hand, teacher unionism has promoted more internal professional democratic decision making; on the other hand, this increased democratization has been confined to the professional school bureaucracy. Joel Spring has summed up the potential problem succinctly:

> The major problem with teacher unionism in terms of traditional American thought is that it might increase teacher control of school policy at the expense of parental control of education.[3]

In effect, the struggle by unions to carve out a political power base may raise formidable barriers to citizen access and influence in running our public schools. Teacher unionism, then, may intensify the tension between professional and citizen control of public education. What is won at the bargaining table could lead to the freezing of educational

policies and practices, which parents or other citizens may wish to change.

Teacher unionism has increased the voice of teachers in the educational decision-making process; teacher unionism has broken the monopolistic control exercised by the old educational power structure; teacher unionism has forced us to rethink the question of school governance. These are all positive benefits of the teacher union movement.

Nonetheless, teacher unionism is not without its contradictions. The key questions are: Can teacher unions, guided by a protectionist ideology, make any significant improvements in the quality of public education? Will internal professional control continue to be the primary aim of teacher unionism? Will this aim in the coming years serve to place teachers in conflict with citizen groups seeking fundamental changes in school decision making? How can the economic and political rights of teachers be guaranteed during a period of citizen discontent with both the cost and substance of educational services? Students of the politics of education ought to explore constructive ways that could help to resolve these contradictions.

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